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ABSTRACT

Statements of educational need developed through needs assessment processes should not be ranked without careful consideration of factors that can facilitate or impede their attainment. The process of determining the resource requirements for meeting assessed needs and estimating resource availability can be enhanced by following several suggestions: involve a carefully selected sampling of individuals representing all groups affected by attempts to fill the need being considered; take into account the economic, human, legal, social, and political variables influencing efforts to meet the need; determine the probability of modifying conditions that could impede efforts to meet the need; using a rating scale, arrive at a rating that indicates the feasibility of addressing each need. Establishing priorities for needs to be resolved involves determining the intensity and extent of the need, the duration of the need, the relevance of meeting the need to the achievement of identified goals, the feasibility of meeting the need, and the results anticipated from meeting the need. (Author/PGD)

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SYSTEMATIC PLANNING SERIES
FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES

MONOGRAPH NUMBER 3

IDENTIFYING RESOURCES AND CONSTRAINTS AND PRIORITIZING NEEDS

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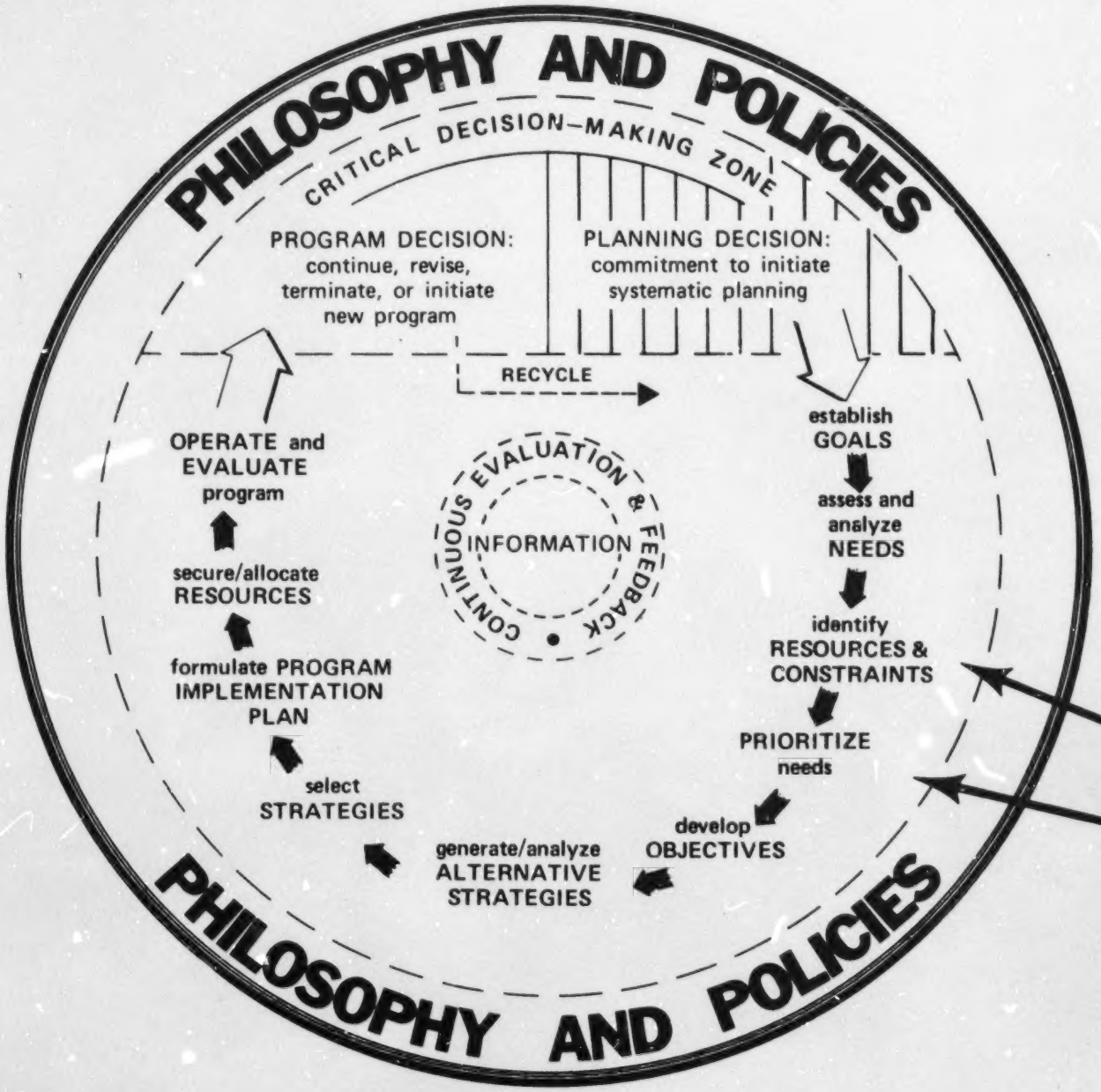

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IDENTIFYING RESOURCES AND CONSTRAINTS AND PRIORITIZING NEEDS

Identifying Resources and Constraints

The identification of resources and constraints is a logical extension of the needs assessment phase and an essential antecedent of the needs prioritization phase. A primary outcome of needs assessment is an enumeration of need statements which incorporate the nature, dimensions, and extent of the discrepancies between desired conditions (goals) and existing conditions. These need statements should not be ranked without careful consideration of those factors which will contribute to or facilitate goal attainment and those factors which may impede or restrain goal attainment. The former factors are resources; the latter, constraints. A basic process for identifying resources and constraints can be defined as seeking answers to the following three questions: (1) What will it take to achieve an identified goal? (2) Which of these things identified as necessary to goal achivement are available or can be procured? (These are resources.) (3) Which of these things are either unavailable or unattainable? (These are constraints.) Although this process may appear to be an oversimplification, do not hastily assume that these questions can be sufficiently or accurately answered by one or two individuals in an hour or two. The key to successful completion of this phase is the involvement of a carefully selected group of individuals in the process.

Initial consideration of the resource problem will not lead to a final determination of resource requirements. Such a determination cannot be made until objectives are developed and strategies selected. A more exact and detailed specification of the resources necessary to support a proposed program will be one outcome of the generation and analysis of alternative strategies. Final decisions regarding resources must then be made prior to program implementation. The preliminary examination of resources and constraints should be designed to generate enough information regarding existing resource variables to enable intelligent decision-making as needs are prioritized.

Suggestions for Identifying Resources and Constraints

1. **Involve a carefully selected sampling of individuals representing all groups that will be involved in or affected by attempts to resolve the need under examination.** As previously stated, one or two individuals cannot produce a listing of resources and constraints that accurately or comprehensively reflects all relevant variables. This phase requires input from all parties who may be directly or indirectly affected by future program planning or implementation. Provision should be made for securing input from each of the following groups at an appropriate point in this process:

    a. Individuals who will have responsibility for planning, implementing, and/or operating a program designed to meet this particular need. Included in this group would be administrators, teachers, and other professional and non-professional staff members.

    b. Individuals who will be directly affected by efforts to satisfy the need. Programs designed to address educational needs should by definition, have a direct impact upon students. In many instances, students should be able to provide important insights (unavailable from other sources) into the kinds of variables that will influence, directly or indirectly, the probability of success.

    c. Individuals who will be indirectly affected by efforts to satisfy the need. Many individuals and groups within the school community may be indirectly affected: parents, students, teachers, and administrators other than those involved in the proposed program; non-professional employees of the school system; etc.

    d. Individuals who may be called upon to support the programs designed to satisfy the need. All of the individuals and groups indicated in connection with the three preceding categories are likely to be asked to support, either openly or implicitly, a new program. In addition, school board members, community leaders, school and community organizations (e.g., P.T.A., Chamber of Commerce), SDE consultants, etc. may be called upon to render support during the planning, implementation, or operation of a proposed program.

    e. Individuals who have previous experience with programs designed to address the same or a similar kind of need. Personnel from other LEA's, the SDE and/or university consultants may be able to provide useful information based upon their involvement in similar efforts.

2. **Consider all factors or variables which may influence or impact efforts designed to satisfy (meet) the need.** Too often the tendency is to focus solely upon economic factors and to ignore the more subtle, but equally as critical, types of resources and constraints that can influence a proposed program. In order to avoid this tunnel-visioned approach, those responsible for coordinating this phase can begin by focusing upon the various categories of factors that usually affect--directly or indirectly--the success or failure of an educational effort. The next step would be to list the specific factors within each category that relate to the need under consideration and to briefly state requirements for need satisfaction in terms of each of these factors. The listing which follows includes some of the categories of resources and constraints that commonly affect an educational endeavor:

   a. **Economic** -- Although it will be impossible at this stage to project the exact amount of money that will be required to satisfy a particular need, tentative estimates can be developed. Included among cost determinants should be such considerations as (1) equipment, (2) supplies and materials, (3) facilities, (4) personnel, and (5) training requirements.

   b. **Human (People)** -- Few will argue that the most important resource in any educational endeavor is the human one. All too often, however, many of the human variables that directly affect program outcome are overlooked. Projections of human resource needs frequently do not go beyond quantitative factors; individual human qualities are not given adequate attention. To determine the nature or type of contribution that will be required of individuals involved in the satisfaction of a particular need, those involved in this phase of the planning process might raise the following kinds of questions:

      (1) What kinds of expertise, talents, and abilities are most likely to be required of those responsible for program implementation and operation?

      (2) Is resolution of the need in question likely to require a program that departs radically from present or traditional practices, one that will demand a great deal of change in people's behavior and/or attitudes? What specifc kind of human attributes (i.e., values, interests, desires, aspirations, biases, etc.) will best complement the proposed effort? (This question should be answered for those who will be responsible for subsequent program planning, implementation, and operation, e.g. administrators, teachers, and other school system personnel; for those who will be directly affected by such a new program, e.g. parents; and for others who may be called upon for support, e.g. school board members, community leaders.)

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(3) What type and level of commitment will be required of the various groups of individuals responsible for and/or affected by the proposed effort? (All of the individuals or groups who are likely to be called upon for support should be identified and the kind of support expected of each should be specified.)

c. **Legal/Policy** -- Any Federal, State or local law, policy, rule or regulation that has relevance to the particular need under consideration should be identified and carefully analyzed.

d. **Social/Political** -- A review of the existing social and environmental conditions and political climate of the community which a school (system) serves should be made at this point. What prevailing concerns or problems are being expressed by the citizenry through their elected officials? Are any of the current controversial issues related (directly or indirectly) to the need under consideration? etc.

3. **Ascertain the degree to which each factor or variable identified above is likely to contribute to success in meeting the need under consideration.** Each variable should be examined in terms of whether it is (a) essential, (b) supportive, or (c) peripheral to need satisfaction. The determinations reached at this point will, of course, be somewhat tentative and preliminary due to the fact that a program to meet the need will not have been conceptualized. The nature and extent of the need should, however, suggest how important or critical each of the indicated factors will be in satisfying the need. During this stage, it is extremely important to isolate those factors which are prerequisite or absolutely essential to the satisfaction of an identified need.

4. **Describe or characterize each factor or variable that may impact upon need satisfaction in terms of its current or existing attributes and determine whether each is likely to have a positive, negative, or neutral influence or impact upon a program designed to satisfy the indicated need.** To complete this exercise, information relative to the current status of each identified factor must be collected. Next the existing conditions ascribed to each factor should be compared with the previously projected requirements for each. The difference or discrepancy between these two will indicate whether a given factor will be a resource in subsequent program planning, whether it will be a constraint, or whether the existing condition is such that it will probably have no significant effect upon future program planning and implementation. How are these judgements made? Obviously, if the existing conditions match or surpass projected requirements the factor can be viewed as a resource (positive factor). If there is an inordinate discrepancy between existing conditions and projected requirements, a constraint (negative factor) exists. If,

however, the discrepancy between a required and an existing condition is not so extreme as to completely stifle future efforts toward needs satisfaction, this factor may be neither a resource nor a constraint, but rather a neutral factor. Those involved in this phase of the planning cycle will need to exercise a great deal of professional judgment in determining how each relevant factor will influence future program planning and implementation efforts.

5. **Determine the probability of altering or modifying conditions associated with each factor which currently appears to be a constraint.** Few constraints are absolute or fixed; most are subject to change. Here a distinction should be made between those constraints which are internal to the school system, i.e. staffing patterns, attitudes of employees, space utilization, etc., and those which originate in the external environment, i.e., prevailing social and political climate, laws, etc. Although the leadership of the school system can attempt to affect external conditions, e.g. through the conduct of a public information program, etc., the leadership obviously can hope to exert a greater influence upon circumstances and conditions over which they have direct control. Each constraint should be carefully analyzed at this point to determine whether it is real or imaginary and the possibilities of neutralizing the constraint and/or converting the constraining factor into a resource. Timing should also be taken into consideration. Any given constraint may be dissipated over time. The time which might be required to accomplish this end should be estimated. This consideration can be of real significance during the next phase of the planning process, prioritizing needs. Decision-makers may, upon considering the possibility and time requirements for eliminating a constraint, determine to delay action geared to meet a particular need until the constraining factor has been removed. (The removal of a constraint would, under ordinary circumstances, require positive action on the part of system decision-makers.) This determination would directly affect the priority listing of needs.

6. **Arrive at a composite rating which indicates the feasibility of addressing each identified need.** The rating should be based upon the information gathered and judgments made concerning relevant factors and variables. A simple rating scale, which incorporates the suggestions offered in 3-5 above, follows:

    a. Assign each identified factor points, on a scale of 2-0, based upon its relative importance in need satisfaction; i.e., "essential" = 2, "supportive" = 1, "peripheral" = 0.

    b. Assign each identified factor points, on a scale of (+2)-(-2), based upon the kind of impact or influence the factor, given the existing conditions ascribed to it, is likely to have on need satisfaction; i.e., "positive" = +2, "neutral" = 0, "negative" = -2.

c. Assign two (2) points to each factor which was designated as "negative," but which was judged to have a high probability for conversion to a positive factor; assign one (1) point to each factor previously designated as a "negative" factor which seems to have a high probability for converstion to a neutral factor.

d. Total the points assigned to each factor (a-c) for each need, and total the sub-totals of all factors for each need.

e. Divide the total number of points for each need by the number of factors associated with each need to derive a composite score for the need.

f. Using the scores derived in "e" above, rank the needs from the most to the least feasible (from the highest to the lowest score).

The rank ordering of needs which will emerge from application of the above rating procedures can serve as an indicator of the feasibility of pursuing efforts to satisfy each identified need. The above procedures are merely suggestive; they are not proposed as the "one way" to approach this phase of the planning cycle. They do, however, provide a systematic framework for identifying resources and constraints. Furthermore, the application of these procedures produces results which can be used not only in the prioritization of needs but also in subsequent considerations of resource requirements. Too often, those engaged in program planning "muddle through" this phase, haphazardly identify an incomplete list of factors which may impact on future efforts, and finally fail to relate any outcomes of this activity phase to subsequent phases in the planning cycle. A thorough analysis of all variables relevant to the satisfaction of an identified need during this phase of the process can greatly facilitate and enhance subsequent planning tasks.

Prioritizing Needs

Prioritizing needs is a milestone, if not the watershed, phase in the planning process. The outcomes of the three preceding phases (Establishing Goals, Assessing and Analyzing Needs, and Identifying Resources and Constraints) merge at this important decision point. In turn, the input for subsequent planning activities is limited and determined by the decisions reached during this phase. Furthermore, following the prioritization of needs, subtle, but significant, changes may occur in the functioning of the planning process itself. (These changes are discussed in subsequent pages of this monograph.)

The ranking of identified needs in order of precedence, importance, or priority is implicitly an ordering of the goals from which these needs were derived. Decisions regarding this rank ordering should be based upon the information collected and analyzed as a part of the assessment and analysis of needs and the identification of resources and constraints. It is incumbent upon decision makers to synthesize this information as they reach determinations concerning the relative criticality of the needs and the comparative necessity and relevancy of satisfying these needs. Additionally, the feasibility of meeting each need should be a factor in reaching decisions as to priorities.

The relationships between the first three phases of the planning cycle were alluded to in monographs one and two and the first section of this monograph. The activities conducted in these early phases are inextricably tied to the end that will be realized through needs prioritization: the establishment of one or more focal points for detailed program planning. The priority needs will delimit and define the nature and scope of objectives development, strategy analysis and selection; that is to say, the choice of priority needs will determine the focus of the program which will evolve in the remaining phases of the planning process. Although priority needs statements lead directly to the development of objectives, those involved in program planning should not lose sight of the fact that each identified need statement was derived from a goal. Need statements embody the discrepancy or difference between ideal or intended conditions (goals) and existing conditions (determined through the needs assessment). The authors have chosen to relate the development of objectives to need statements because these statements do focus upon documented inadequacies and deficiencies, conditions which are to be ameliorated through a carefully planned program defined by clearly specified objectives. An objective which is developed by reference to a need statement will, however, relate logically and directly to the goal from which the need statement was derived if a systematic approach to planning has been followed. The planning process should be understood (and practiced) as a logical progression of activities, all of which have as their origin a goal statement.

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Certain implications emerge from the conception of the needs prioritization phase as the culmination of the previous phases in the planning cycle and the point of departure for succeeding phases -- from the acceptance of needs prioritization as the watershed phase in the planning cycle. The following implications should be of real interest to the practitioner seeking to understand how to plan and administer a systematic planning effort in his organization:

1. As previously stressed, the first four phases in the planning cycle (Establishing Goals, Assessing and Analyzing Needs, Identifying Resources and Constraints, and Prioritizing Needs) are intricately related, so closely in fact, that those responsible for "planning" the planning effort may choose to view these phases as a unified stage in the process. How might this affect the management of the planning process? Data collection devices may be so structured as to provide for the simultaneous gathering of information required for all four phases, thereby saving time (particularly of potential respondents), money, and increasing the overall efficiency of the planning process. The same individuals might serve on the steering committee, task force or whatever organizational vehicle may have been established to spearhead and guide the initial planning efforts. One individual might be assigned administrative responsibility for leading and managing these four phases of the planning process. Those responsible for managing a local planning endeavor will possibly identify other relationships among these four phases.

   Following the prioritization of needs, however, the planning endeavor enters a different stage and assumes a slightly different character. The development of objectives signals the beginning of a detailed and specific program planning effort, and succeeding phases (Generating and Analyzing Alternative Strategies through Operating/Evaluating Program) are interdependent and must be interrelated to assure that the emergent program is coherent and sound. Once needs have been prioritized, the planning effort may be reorganized; specific responsibilities may be assigned and/or reassigned; leadership may change. If such organizational changes are to be made, this is the point where such should occur.

2. The scope of the planning effort is significantly narrowed when decisions are made concerning priority needs. Goal-setting is an open-ended exercise, limited only by prevailing philosophy and policies. Because goals express ideals, people are entitled, and should be encouraged, to do a bit of dreaming, to think freely. The brakes will be applied gradually as needs are assessed and analyzed and resources and constraints are identified. The act of prioritizing needs, which involves serious consideration of what is necessary, feasible, relevant, etc., results in the establishment of some very real and practical parameters. Resource availability and other practical considerations will dictate that only a selected number of the priority needs be addressed. The tasks which follow and

which should result in the implementation of a program to meet those well-chosen needs require detailed, specific, and specialized thought and action. The planning endeavor can no longer be viewed as a somewhat free-wheeling, outer-directed effort; it must now be conceived and managed as an extremely purposeful attempt to develop a program or programs that will utilize scarce resources in such a way as to maximize the effectiveness of the organization in satisfying identified needs and thereby achieving its goals.

3. The narrowing of the focus and scope of the planning process will, in all likelihood, suggest the need for a somewhat different group of primary participants in or contributors to the effort. Throughout the first four phases (Establishing Goals through Prioritizing Needs), the primary participants should represent a broad cross section of people from the school community. The writers suggest that lay citizens (board members, parents, community leaders) be heavily involved in these initial phases. Once priority need statements have been adopted and made public, however, professional educators need to assume the dominant role in program planning. The development of objectives, generation, analysis, and selection of strategies, and succeeding program phases require, as previously suggested, highly specialized thinking. The tasks associated with these phases can be most effectively and efficiently accomplished by experienced educators with a high degree of professional expertise. Those who will have responsibility for implementing, operating, and evaluating the program should also have primary planning responsibility. This is not to suggest that these phases of the planning process should be completely isolated from other interested parties. It is to say, however, that there are appropriate points for involving individuals external to the school system, and there are some activities that can be best executed by professional educators. The recent emphasis upon "opening up" the schools to the public by securing widespread input and involvement from the lay citizenry has, unfortunately, been misconstrued by some who have failed to distinguish between those matters to which lay citizens should have input and those which are "best left to professional educators." The leadership of a school system should give careful consideration to this issue and should establish a policy relative to same and make this policy clear, particularly to system employees. An important determinant in the formulation of such a policy should be whether a firm commitment can be made to use or seriously consider non-professional input to a particular issue. If such a commitment cannot be made, such involvement should not be sought. It goes without saying that it is better not to ask people what they think at all than to ask for their opinions and then ignore them! This truism is particularly applicable to the needs prioritization phase.

Because the prioritization of need statements is a critical crossroad in the planning process, serious attention should be given to the important decisions to be made at this point. The process used to prioritize needs must be developed at the local level, for it must intermesh with the ongoing decision-making patterns in a given school system. The designation of priority needs is (or should be) one of the most important decisions made by an educational agency, and for this reason, the decision must be reached in such a manner that all interested and involved parties will accept and support it. The suggestions which follow should be viewed and interpreted in the context of the preceding statements.

Suggestions for Prioritizing Needs

1. **Make an early determination concerning who should make decisions regarding the relative priority of identified need statements, and honor the decisions made by these individuals.** Naturally, the nature and scope of the planning effort will greatly determine who should make these critical decisions. If the planning process is comprehensive in nature, the local board of education, upon the recommendation of the system superintendent, may be the most appropriate decision-making body. Representatives from the community may also be involved in the process. However, if the planning process is being utilized to enhance decision-making regarding a more narrowly defined and specialized problem, e.g. a staff development program for teachers, decision-makers at this point may be administrators (superintendent, principals, etc.), the teachers themselves, or a combination of these two groups. Regardless of who makes the final decisions concerning priority needs, all who will be affected, directly or indirectly, by this decision should be informed in advance of who the decision-makers will be.

2. **Develop and adopt a set of criteria to be used in deciding about priority needs.** Those designated as the decision-makers should have the prerogative of adopting the criteria to be used; to impose a set of predetermined criteria upon the decision-makers would severly limit their authority and could even make a mockery of the entire process. (If the criteria are extremely rigid, those who determine the criteria could, in effect, be making the decisions.) The criteria should incorporate or relate to the information collected in the needs assessment and analysis and resources and constraints identification phases. Although local considerations will suggest the most appropriate criteria for judgment, the following are relevant to most judgments of this nature in an educational setting:

   a. The extent of the present deficiency. This should be examined in terms of both the intensity of the need (the degree of the discrepancy between the ideal and the existing conditions) and the frequency of the need (the number of people affected by the need and how often the need occurs).

   b. The probable duration of the need.

   c. The relevancy of the need to the achievement of an identified goal.

   d. The feasibility of meeting the need as indicated by the resources and constraints identified in the previous phase. (If composite feasibility ratings were established for each identified need, these can be used.)

e. The "pay-off" anticipated from the satisfaction of a need. "Pay-Off" refers to the relationship between expected benefits and resources utilized.

The above criteria are neither all-inclusive nor as detailed and specific as might be desirable in a real-life situation, but they do include some of the factors that may contribute to the setting of priorities. Whatever criteria are selected for use in a particular planning effort, the decision-makers responsible for prioritizing the needs should clarify these criteria to those who will be affected by the outcome.

3. **Use professional judgment in the application of the criteria for selection of priority needs.** While the application of objective criteria is both an expedient and judicious approach to needs prioritization, this procedure cannot be put to use without the intervention of subjective considerations. Choices neither can be nor should be made in a completely objective manner. Those who have been assigned responsibility for deciding which needs are to receive priority should be both willing and able to exercise sound judgment.

4. **Determine how many of the identified priority needs can be addressed with resources which are currently available.** This determination may be made by someone other than those responsible for prioritizing the needs. Certainly the superintendent and board of education will have final responsibility in this area.

5. **Notify all interested and involved individuals of the outcome of the needs prioritization.** This announcement should specify not only which needs are to receive priority attention but also how and why they were selected.

6. **Maintain priority listing for future reference.** Under ordinary circumstances, it will not be feasible to meet all identified needs at one time; however, neither the priority listing nor the information used to determine same should be discarded following the completion of this phase. This documentation should be retained in a central information center for future use. Resources may be available at a later date to meet those identified needs which cannot be met at the present.